



NATIONAL CHICKEN COUNCIL

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TESTING PROGRAM LAUNCHED TO ENSURE CHICKEN PRODUCTS ARE FREE OF AVIAN INFLUENZA

WASHINGTON, January 5, 2006 -- The U.S. commercial chicken industry announced today a testing program to ensure that chicken flocks and the food products made from them are free of potentially hazardous forms of avian influenza. Participating companies will test every flock to ensure that it is safe.

“Through comprehensive testing covering all flocks, chicken companies will add another layer to the multiple barriers that already exist to protect Americans consumers and continue to ensure safety and quality of the food supply,” said Stephen Pretanik, director of science and technology for the National Chicken Council (NCC), the industry’s trade association.

The H5N1 highly pathogenic form of avian influenza causing fear of an influenza epidemic has never occurred in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Under the NCC program, participating companies will take samples from each flock while it is still on the farm. Tests will be conducted under procedures approved by the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP), an existing federal/state cooperative program.

Any flock found to have avian influenza in the H5 or H7 types will be promptly and humanely destroyed on the farm and disposed of in an environmentally acceptable manner. None of the birds will be sent to the processing plant or otherwise enter the food chain.

Only H5 and H7 are considered “notifiable” under the rules of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) because they are the only types known to be capable of changing from the mild, “low pathogenic” form of the disease to the “highly pathogenic” form that causes widespread mortality in poultry. Other forms of avian influenza have no potential for impact on product quality because low-pathogenic virus is not found in poultry meat.

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If disease in the H5 or H7 types occurs in a flock, the industry believes that the best way to prevent the disease from spreading, or possibly turning into the highly pathogenic form, is to destroy all the birds in an affected flock, Pretanik said.

In the event of an outbreak, the NCC plan calls for the establishment of a control zone two miles around any affected flock in which other flocks would be held and tested, with testing repeated weekly. The continued testing would ensure that flocks are clear of H5/H7 avian influenza before going to market.

NCC is currently accepting signups by companies in the industry. Companies with more than 90 percent of chicken production in the United States have already enrolled. They are required to report their findings monthly to NCC. Any confirmed finding of an H5 or H7 virus would be reported promptly by the company or the state veterinarian to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which would report it to OIE.

Companies are required to keep records of flocks tested under the program and to have audits conducted by independent, third-party auditors at least once per year.

In addition to the testing program, numerous initiatives are already in place to protect poultry flocks and the consuming public from avian influenza. Extensive AI testing is already being done through state laboratories. The U.S. government prohibits the importation of live poultry or poultry products from countries currently affected by Asian bird flu (the H5N1 highly pathogenic form of AI); more than 99 percent of all the chicken consumed in the United States is produced in the United States, with the rest imported from Canada; commercial chickens in the U.S. are raised in buildings to protect them from wild birds that may carry some forms of AI; poultry company personnel monitor flocks for any sign of disease, and company veterinarians take prompt action as required; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has inspectors in every chicken processing plant to inspect birds before and after processing to ensure that they are wholesome.

“Americans have a very high degree of confidence in the safety of their food supply, and we will continue to work with state and federal agencies to ensure that chicken is safe,” Pretanik said.

The National Chicken Council represents integrated chicken producer-processors, the companies that produce, process and market chickens. Member companies of NCC account for approximately 95 percent of the chicken sold in the United States.

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